

Robert Mickens

Why Catholic Church leaders risk failing on the issue of sexual abuse

Bishops make more promises to get it right this time as the Church continues to implode



Pope Francis prays at the beginning of the third day of the Vatican's conference on dealing with clerical sex abuse, at the Vatican, Feb. 23. (Photo by EPA-EFE/Alessandra Tarantino/POOL/MaxPPP)

Organizers of the recent Vatican "summit" on the protection of minors, and a number of the bishops who attended it, are trying to assure the world that the four-day meeting brought about a "change of heart" in the Church's leaders, especially those who — up to now — have underestimated the clergy sex abuse crisis.

In fact, before the Feb. 21-24 meeting even got started its chief planners indicated that a main goal would be to convince all the bishops in the world that the abuse of minors was not just a "Western" problem.

When it was all done and over, one those organizers, Jesuit Father Hans Zollner, said the highly-publicized event marked a "quantitative and qualitative leap" in the global Church's response to abuse. He called it an important new step on the slow and painful journey of "turning things around."

A bishop from the Pacific Islands likened it to "a wake-up call."

You will have to forgive those who have not been sleeping the past three or more decades — particularly abuse survivors — for their skepticism.

At the Vatican summit a number of statements of intent were made and many important words were spoken.

They've all been said before. And it was hard to detect much if anything that was new.

Even Australian Archbishop Mark Coleridge, who was the homilist at the gathering's final Mass, admitted: "The time for words is past; now is the time for action."

So what can one say about the Vatican summit?

We've been here before

First of all, most reporters and commentators all too quickly (and uncritically) defined it as a "monumental," "unprecedented" and "landmark" event. That was true only to a certain degree. It was indeed the first time such a meeting on sex abuse was held inside the Vatican with the participation of a pope.

But it was not the first time that a large representation of the world's bishops and the leading figures of the Roman Curia tried to tackle the issue together.

Exactly seven years ago — in February 2012 — delegates from 110 episcopal conferences (though most were not conference presidents) and representatives of 35 religious orders gathered at the Jesuit-run Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome for an international symposium called, "Towards Healing and Renewal." It too, was a four-day meeting.

What did they do?

According to a timeline of events on the website for the recent Vatican summit: "Participants received input on different aspects of the issue and how to face them in their own countries by developing guidelines and other adequate instruments."

The movers and shakers

The planners and leading figures at the 2012 symposium were mostly the same people who organized and backed this latest gathering.

The earlier event was the brainchild of two Jesuit priests, first and foremost Federico Lombardi, then director of the Holy See Press Office. He planned the meeting over many months with his confrere Hans Zollner, a German who was teaching psychology at the Gregorian University.

The symposium ended up being held at the university because Benedict XVI's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, blocked efforts to stage it at the Vatican. Bertone also instructed *L'Osservatore Romano* not to give it too much prominence in the pages of the Vatican paper.

Cardinal William Levada, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), gave the symposium's opening address.

Msgr. Charles Scicluna, the doctrinal office's lead prosecutor of abuse cases, gave a speech in which he denounced the Church's culture of silence regarding such abuse.

He courageously described it as *omertà*, an Italian word denoting the Mafia's code of silence. (Incidentally, Scicluna was named auxiliary bishop in Malta eight months later.)

"No strategy for the prevention of child abuse will ever work without commitment and accountability," Scicluna said at the 2012 meeting.

Sound familiar? This was one of the hallmarks of the recent summit.

Another leading figure at that earlier abuse symposium was German Cardinal Reinhard Marx.

His Archdiocese of Munich put up an initial \$1.6 million to launch an internet-based "learning center" on abuse prevention in coordination with a German university and the Gregorian University.

It led to the establishment of the Centre for Child Protection (CCP) at the Gregorian under the direction of Zollner. Marx, not Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, was also the one who convinced Pope Francis to establish the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors in 2014. Both Marx and O'Malley are members of the pope's C9 privy council of cardinals.

The American "Capuchin cardinal," recognized by many as a crusader against clergy sex abuse, was named coordinator of the council and became its trusted and friendly face.

But it was the German "panzer cardinal" who literally pushed the pope to form the new commission.

Lombardi, Zollner, Scicluna and Marx. They were all there in 2012 leading that first global Church symposium on abuse. They were also the leaders in 2019.

The promise for guidelines, new 'motu proprio' on abuse

A second thing to note about this latest abuse summit at the Vatican is that there was a promise to draw up guidelines (*vademecum*) to help bishops know exactly how to deal with abuse cases.

Why? Such guidelines already exist. They are spelled out in a CDF "[circular letter](#)" that was sent to all bishops' conference in 2011 with the instruction that each conference use them to draw up norms specific to their region and situation.

In addition, the canonical procedures to deal with abusers already exist and are clear. They need only be applied and enforced. This directive in the circular letter merits particular attention:

"the prescriptions of civil law regarding the reporting of such crimes to the designated authority should always be followed."

Yet, some episcopal conferences — including Italy's — are hesitant to enforce mandatory reporting.

Another, issue that has not been resolved at the universal level is how to discipline bishops who have been negligent in applying existing norms and, worse, those who have covered-up abuse.

Pope Francis in June 2015 created a special section in the tribunal of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to do just that. It was even listed in the 2016 edition of the *Annuario Pontificio*, but there were no officials appointed to it. That's because it had already been aborted.

Then in June 2016 the pope issued a "motu proprio," [As a loving mother](#), in which he said negligent bishops and religious superiors could be judged and even removed by the "competent congregation of the Roman Curia" — those pertaining to bishops, Eastern Churches, religious orders and Churches in mission territory (Propaganda Fide).

But so far none of these congregations has reported whether it has ever heard even a single case against a negligent prelate or the eventual outcome of such a process.

At the end of the abuse summit it was announced that Francis is now going to issue yet another "motu proprio" on "the protection of minors and vulnerable persons." Will this one finally get it right? And, more importantly, will it be enforced?

Again, there have been lots of words and many promises. As Archbishop Coleridge said, now is the time for action.

What was missing at the abuse summit

A third observation is what the Feb. 21-24 meeting at the Vatican was lacking.

There were about 190 people in attendance. But only 13 of them were women, excluding abuse survivors who offered mostly pre-recorded testimony of their experiences.

And while three of the women delivered strong speeches before the assembly of bishops, it was disappointing and irresponsible not to include many more of them.

Lay people in general, especially families of abuse survivors, were not invited. Law enforcement officials, medical professionals and other people with expertise in dealing with abuse were also excluded.

The Catholic bishops and their closest priest collaborators have proven over and over again that they are incapable of initiating any proper action regarding sex abuse concerning their fellow clerics.

With few exceptions, they have acted only when forced by external forces — the media, law officials, the high cost of court cases, the threat of imprisonment....

There was also a seeming lack of oversight in vetting the abuse survivors who gave their searing testimonies. The organizers admitted that they did not know the identity or current status of the priests who abused these survivors. They said local Churches selected the people who gave witness talks.

Perhaps most troubling was the lack of a clear understanding of how the defensive attitude of Catholic leaders, which was thought to have been overcome by now, continues to damage the Church's credibility and image. This was sadly evident in Pope Francis when he spoke at length at the end of Sunday's final Mass.

The pope dedicated at least 40 percent of his talk citing international statistics relating to sexual abuse that occurs *outside* of the Church. His point that priests do not constitute anywhere near the majority of all those who abuse is well taken.

And, in fairness, he may have belabored that point in order to debunk his Catholic critics who believe — against findings of mental health professionals — that there is a causal relationship between homosexuality and the abuse of minors.

But to the ears of survivors of clerical sex abuse, Francis' words sounded overly defensive.

More troubles ahead

The abuse summit has come at an extremely troubling time for the Catholic Church.

In the days before the meeting was even convened, Pope Francis took the unprecedented step of "defrocking" the former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, removing him from the clerical state. This came after the pope had already taken the red hat from the former Archbishop of Washington.

Mr. McCarrick never faced a civil court, but was subjected to a canonical process that determined he had sexually abused at least one minor (the Vatican has provided few details of the case). Francis opted to bypass a full Church trial and stripped McCarrick of the priesthood through an administrative act.

Within a matter of weeks or months, it is most likely that the pope will be forced to remove a second cardinal from the illustrious red-hatted college and remove him, as well, from the priesthood.

Cardinal George Pell who has been convicted by a jury in an Australian civil court is now in jail awaiting sentencing, even while he promises to lodge an appeal.

But regardless of the final outcome, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has already begun a canonical process to investigate the abuse charges against the cardinal.

In both the McCarrick and Pell cases, external pressures from civil authorities — not Vatican guidelines or protocols — forced the pope and his aides to take action.

This may, perhaps, be only a foreshadowing of a colossal redefining of the Church's frayed relationship to civil society, especially in Europe and the West.

Since the age of Enlightenment, the Christian Church has seen its influence on societal moral norms and the laws that define them gradually and greatly diminish.

The Roman Church in particular, whose leaders initially ignored or covered up clergy sex abuse, has been exposed to everyone (except, perhaps, still far too many bishops) as being incapable of dealing with this crisis with its current structures, theology and ecclesiology.

The ongoing implosion of the Church

As Massimo Faggioli suggested in a recent article published by *La Croix International*: It is not simply a question of dealing with a criminal phenomenon. It is also a theological question: from the theology of the sacraments (especially ordination to the priesthood) to ecclesiological models; from the role of women in the Church to last century's magisterium on sexual morality.

"The most complicated issue concerns the structural reforms required to address the mystique surrounding the priesthood and the episcopate, which are often still seen as positions of honor without the responsibilities that derive from holy orders.

The sexual abuse crisis is just the latest and very dramatic stage in the ongoing implosion of a Roman Church that continues to stubbornly cling to governing and ministerial structures that are anachronistic and inadequate to its mission and purpose.

They are in critical need of reform.

Until the bishops address this — as Pope Francis seems to be trying through his efforts to develop synodality and decentralized authority — the Church will never be able to deal adequately with sex abuse among its clergy... or any other serious issues.

This is the "wake-up call" the pope and bishops need to hear.